HOME FOR THE FIRST TIME

March 29, 1992

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
2 Corinthians 5:16-21
Luke 15:1-3, 11-32

"...But while he was still far off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion; he ran and put his arms around him and kissed him."
-Luke 15:20 (NRSV)

"You can't go home again," Thomas Wolfe assured us. And he was right. You know that, if you've tried to do it, because once you leave, home is no longer home for you in the way it once was. You are no longer part of it. What was home goes on without you, and while you may try, your homecomings are visits. You have become a tourist. "You can't go home again."

But in another sense Thomas Wolfe was wrong. There is a sense in which home is always with you and in you and about you. There is a sense in which things that were said to you and happened to you at home continue to have influence in your life years later. There is also the sense in which at a reunion with family and old friends you are occasionally able to take up right where you left off twenty years ago. No matter who you are and what you have accomplished - home is where you are known, as you are, the raw material, unrefined. That is why we experience the allure of home and sometimes dread it. People at home know us. In fact, it is important to go home, to claim and affirm and celebrate who we were and who we are.

Thomas Wolfe, I have never thought was as close to real truth on this topic as was T. S. Eliot, who wrote an alternate word, a good and suggestive word:

> "The end of all our exploring
> Will be to arrive where we started
> And to know the place for the first time."

So - home, for the first time.

Jim Forbes, preaching minister at Riverside Church in New York City, told a group of us that after he preached on the

prodigal son recently, an elderly pillar of the congregation greeted him at the door and said:

> "I've heard so many sermons on the prodigal son, sometimes I wish that boy had not come home... had stayed away."

That sent me to my card file and, sure enough, there were eleven 3 x 5 cards, with the exception of Christmas and Easter, when choosing a text does not require much imagination, I've spent more time on this story than anything else in the Bible. The reason is simple. It's a great story. A second reason is that it is really good news and we all need a little of that on occasion. And another reason, the more life you live the truer this story becomes.

A young friend of mine, graduate student, good athlete, handsome, a polite, considerate person, just started therapy.

> "I'm almost thirty," he said, "and I'm finally realizing that my parents are not going to love me for who I am. I've felt like I failed them all my life. I was never smart enough, never got good enough grades, never tough enough, never good enough at sports."

Familiar story.

The original is about a father and two sons. But the power of the story and its timelessness could today be cast in terms of a mother and her daughters, or sons, or a woman and man and their family.

The youngest one day says,

> "Dad, I want my part of your estate now. I know I'm in the will for half. But I can't wait. You're pretty healthy after all. You could be around for ten or twenty years. I could be an old man before I get it. So how about you giving me my half now?"

Kenneth Bailey is a fine New Testament scholar who has spent his life researching and teaching in the Middle East, on site, as it were. And Bailey says, "There is no law or custom among the Jews or Arabs which entitles a son to a share of his father's wealth while the father is still alive." The prodigal is actually saying, "I cannot wait for you to die." [Poet and Peasant, p. 162] So when the father grants him his request - actually gives the son his share, the deed to half the property, the title to half the flocks, the contracts and outstanding assets - he is doing something outrageous. The people who heard this story first were stunned. This is no ordinary father. A normal father

would have put that boy straight in no uncertain terms! But that isn't all. This father gives his older son the other half. Now he is dependent on his children, totally.

When the younger son sells the property and livestock and the debt - liquidates it all, takes the cash and runs as far away as he can get - he has pretty much severed his relationship with his father, his family, the village, his culture. That's what the distant or "far country" means. He's done with parents and brothers and always doing what he's told to do. He's free. He has left home for good... he thinks.

So he lives it up, and spends it all. This is not an attractive young man. "Dissolute living" is the way the New Revised Standard Version translates. I rather preferred the "riotous living" of the older translation. In any event, you are allowed to use your creative imagination to decide how he spent all that money. Later on, his brother either can't resist telling on him, or else is engaging in some jealous fantasizing when he complains about the boy devouring all the money with prostitutes. That's the first time anybody mentioned that! Older brothers can be like that. I know. I am one. You always wonder why your younger brother or sister gets away with so much.

In the far country the young son is broke, hungry, miserable and takes a job slopping hogs. "He comes to himself...," sees that alienation from father and family and home is, in actuality, alienation from his very self. He is also hungry, cold and lonely, and he remembers where there is food on the table and maybe even a warm bed.

So, he practices a speech. "Father I have sinned. I'm not worthy to be your son. I'll work as a hired hand." This boy is good! If there ever was a speech generated to get to a father, this is it. I know. I'm one of those too.

So he heads for home. What he doesn't know is that although he has done every despicable, ungrateful and disrespectful thing possible to break the relationship with father and home, it hasn't worked. It was Fred Buechner, I believe, who describes that father watching the road; every morning and evening, walking out to the end of the lot and standing there watching, waiting; several times during the day, finding some reason to be where he can keep an eye on the road; never stops, doesn't talk about it, but never gives up on his child.

And then one day, he sees a ragged, forlorn figure in the distance; recognizes the gait, knows instantly - "It's my son." And then, Bailey tells us, he does something else outrageous, something embarrassing. So he runs, robes flying behind him, down the road to meet his son. Men of substance don't run ever, Bailey says. There are, of course, witnesses. This is all happening outside, where everyone can see - older brother, maybe

some cousins, villagers, hired hands - all of whom, it is safe to assume, are pretty angry at this young boy, very happy to see him returning in rags, eager not so much to welcome him as to say that most delicious refrain, "I told you so," and to enjoy that lovely moment of self-righteousness. The father is protecting the son from that, humbling himself by running down the road, throwing his arms around the boy, kissing him repeatedly, and in this dramatic gesture of unmerited, overwhelming grace the son is restored to his home, to his community and family.

I love the fact that he never quite gets his rehearsed speech out. The father, who in his imagination the boy saw standing in his study, arms folded, brow furrowed, imperially waiting to hear what the prodigal says, willing to listen to a proposal about signing on as a hired hand - his father instead runs down the road and embraces the boy. And when he tries the speech, he never even gets to the hired hand part because his father is barking out orders to bring a robe and ring and kill the fatted calf.

Had this father done what he was supposed to do, frankly what most of us would do and have done, had he waited in the house, and listened to the confession and made the boy experience his degradation a little more fully, he would have gotten another hired hand. But what he wanted was a son - home again - home perhaps for the first time.

Jesus told this story, by the way, because the religious officials, scribes and pharisees, were complaining about the fact that he was associating with some unsavory characters, welcoming apparently, those the religious establishment was sure were unfit, unclean, sinful, immoral. So Jesus said the boy "came to himself" when he was broke, hungry, cold and standing in the mud, which does suggest that when you are alienated from home, from your family, from your God, either because you have broken the relationship yourself, or because others won't let you in, you are, at the same time seriously alienated from yourself; and you need nothing so much as a welcome, an acceptance, a homecoming which reminds you of a fundamental truth - namely that you are a child of God.

And at this point the story invites us to go in deeper and to ask to what degree that may describe the whole human condition generally, and in particular you and me.

In the February issue of The Atlantic Monthly, there was a much discussed major article on the topic of "shame" by Robert Karen. The therapeutic community is telling us that "shame is the preeminent cause of emotional distress in our time." That's pretty important.

Shame is an unconscious feeling of unworthiness; shame is crippling because it implies that a person is unlovable, unwor-

thy. It is the self regarding the self, with the withering and unforgiving eye of contempt.

> "It's like there's a hunter over your shoulder, and the hunter is always coming," one man described it. "And they're going to find out that I'm flawed and defective. They're going to find out that I'm not what I look like I am." [John Bradshaw]

Parents know its power to control and enforce conformity. "You ought to be ashamed," we say on occasion and to say it psychologists observe, is to cause it to happen.

"Who can emerge from childhood without some susceptibility to feelings of defect?" The Atlantic article asked.

The implications are serious. The best current thinking is that the narcissism about which we've been talking for more than a decade is not only selfishness and greed, but may have its roots in shame; in that familiar need which in some people becomes obsessive, the need to succeed, to get ahead and stay ahead, to act out on the stage of life one's worthiness and value. No success is big enough to satisfy that hunger. Success seems only to breed the need for more and so life is lived hard and fast in the grimly determined struggle to affirm one's value, or to compensate for the nagging, negative shame deep inside us that says - You are defective: you are not good enough, strong enough, smart enough.

Tragically religion often plays directly into that, using guilt, fear and shame to enforce conformity, creating rules for this and that, acceptable modes of behavior necessary to please God or convince God to deal kindly with us; usually a stern father, a God who is judge and jury, a spirituality based on fear of punishment, and sometimes a vivid dread of the fires of hell itself. Jesus' most severe critics were not the bad people, the ne'er-do-wells, but religious people who could not understand and therefore would not tolerate the notion of a God of grace not judgment, a God who loves, not condemns: a God who includes not excludes, a God with open arms for anyone, a God who goes out on the road to welcome home anyone who has been living in any far country.

The best defense against a debilitating, emotionally crippling shame is the steady love of parents which accepts the child for who he/she is. The Atlantic Monthly article said religion is about feeling guilty for who you are, and then trying to make amends to make yourself acceptable to God. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is about the love of God which, incredibly, outrageously, accepts you as you are and gives you the freedom to change - out of sheer gratitude for the miracle of your acceptance.

Repentance, religiously defined, is identifying your failures, naming them, feeling properly guilty about them. Repentance, defined by the Gospel of Christ, is turning toward this amazing grace, opening one's life to it, allowing the love of God where it can recreate and renew. Repentance defined by Jesus, is turning toward home - going out on the road and heading in the direction of the one who is waiting with open arms to welcome.

The father in the story made no effort to prevent his son from going to the far country. Sometimes we have to go. In some way every one of us must leave home in order to be ourselves fully, autonomously. You have to leave the nest in order to fly. You have to leave your parents in order to be you. You may even have to leave your religion for a while in order to reclaim it. You may have to leave home in order to go home.

Novelist, Eudora Welty, reflects:

> "Had it (home) meant nothing to us, any place thereafter would have meant less, and we would carry no compass inside ourselves to find home, ever, anywhere at all. We would not even guess what we missed..." ["Place in Fiction," cited by Dan Wakefield, Returning, p. 220, 221]

The story invites each of us to reflect on the home we have left and the far countries in which we are living. For some of us it may be a place, a home we had to leave in order to discover who we were. For some it may have been an aggressive leaving in conflict, still unresolved. It may be a symbolic home and a metaphorical far country. It may have to do with church or a relationship or vocation. Far country may mean loneliness and isolation to which you have gone intentionally, or in which you find yourself unintentionally. Far country may be your fear that if you don't get the job you will be exposed as worthless, so there is nothing you will not do, no work too hard, no task too ambitious, no day too long for you not to invest everything you are in it. That is a familiar but hostile and very lonely country.

The people who were criticizing Jesus were so caught up in a religion which documented their worth and value on the basis of the rules they kept and their belonging to the select circle of the truly righteous... They missed entirely the amazing grace of the God whose love they were desperately trying to earn. They didn't get it. The story was for them. The invitation was for them. **Come Home.**

There was, of course, something working in the young boy's life when he was in the far country. It had nothing to do with him. In fact, he had tried to be rid of it. But there in his memory, in the recesses of his spirit, maybe in the exhausted dreaming of restless nights, something was moving, prodding,

pushing. It was, of course, his father's love. St. Augustine called it restlessness until we rest in God. Gerald May calls it "God's love song in our soul."

Judy Collins, tells about it. She recorded "Amazing Grace" in 1970 at a time which was very difficult personally: loneliness, alcohol, demons and monsters. She had left church years before.

"I had become very sophisticated" she said. "I needed Sunday morning to recover from Saturday night." "Amazing Grace" was added to an album as an afterthought. It probably saved her life. It also came to be a kind of anthem for our culture, deep in the anguish and shame of Vietnam, civil rights, sung at every folk song concert. It's about a precious national dream of going home to a time of justice and compassion and kindness. And the vision may have saved the nation from caving in on itself.

Something impinges on us in the far country - something that will not let us alone.

> "Where shall I go from your spirit?" we sang
> earlier. "If I ascend to heaven, you are there.
> If I make my bed in hell, you are there."

Judy Collins recorded "Amazing Grace" again three years ago for a PBS special. She confessed that in concert she rarely sings the third verse, "in order to keep its promise personal and universal."

> "Through many dangers, toils and snares I have already
> come;
> Tis grace that brought me safe thus far,
> And grace will lead me home."

To every prodigal, alone in a far country, prodigal sons and daughters separated from people they love and not happy about it, prodigals in self-imposed exile because of stubborn anger and resentment, captives in theological or ecclesiastical exile, there is for each one of us a word - a word of Amazing Grace.

It's God in that story, waiting, watching, never giving up, running down the road, arms open to welcome...

And on that road, somewhere, perhaps off in the distance, and perhaps not so very far away - you and me.

> "The end of all our exploring
> will be to arrive where we started,
> And to know the place for the first time."